

Study of Filial Piety in the “BikenChaku” of the Konjaku

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Abstract: The “Konjaku Monogatari-shū”(abbreviated as “Konjaku”) was compiled during the late Heian period and is Japan’s largest collection of tales. It is also the first extensive collection that extensively features Chinese themes. This article focuses on Volume 9, Story 44 “Konjaku,” analyzing the similarities and differences between this story and similar Chinese narratives. It explores the concept of “loyalty taking precedence over filial piety” within the “Konjaku”.

Keywords: Heian period; Konjaku Monogatari-shū; Confucianism; loyalty and filial piety

1. Introduction

The “Konjaku,” compiled in the 11th century, which comprises three parts: “Tenjiku” (ancient India), “Shintan” (ancient China), and “Honchō” (Japan), covering the realms of China, Japan, and India. This collection of Buddhist tales also incorporates narratives influenced by Confucian thought.

This paper centers on Volume 9, Story 44, and its counterpart in Chinese literature. It conducts a comparative analysis of these stories, highlighting their divergences and commonalities in plot. By doing so, we gain insight into how the “Konjaku” departs from conventional Confucian perspectives on loyalty and filial piety.

2. The Debate on the Value Orientation of “Loyalty” and “Filial Piety”

In Volume 9, Story 44, the main content revolves around Bakuya, who is killed by the king for privately keeping a valuable sword. BikenChaku, his son, decides to avenge his father and is willing to sacrifice himself by cutting off his own head. The story reaches its climax as the heads of the king, his envoy, and BikenChaku engage in a struggle in a boiling pot, becoming so indistinguishable that they cannot be separated. The story primarily focuses on the themes of “blood revenge” and “filial piety,” portraying BikenChaku’s conduct in sacrificing himself for filial.

The story of “BikenChaku” has been widely circulated in China. The exact time of its introduction to Japan is uncertain, but it can be inferred that the story of “BikenChaku” was already present in Japan before the compilation of the “Nihon Kokugen Zaisshu Mokuroku” in the 9th century, which record “sou shen ji ‘thirty volumes’”

This research primarily focuses on volume 9 Story 44 of the “Konjaku” and makes a comparison with Gan Bao’s “Sou Shen Ji” Volume 11 as a reference. The goal is to explore the relationship between “loyalty” and “filial piety” reflected in Story 44 and analyze how they are depicted.

	“Konjaku” volume 9 Story 44	“Sou Shen Ji” Volume 11
BikenChaku’s crime	Bakuya received iron, crafted two swords — one sword was presented to the king, and the other sword was hidden.	Kanshou and Bakuya crafted a sword for the king, and it took three years to complete.
King summons BikenChaku for questioning	The king, upon hearing this, became greatly angered, and suddenly summoned Bakuya to accuse him of a crime.	/
BikenChaku’s cause of death	Bakuya then left through the northern gate, entered the southern mountains, concealed himself within a large tree, and eventually passed away.	The king became angry and immediately killed him.

Encounter in the Mountain	“BikenChaku encountered an envoy in the mountains... The royal envoy said, ‘We are under orders to search for your head and the sword you possess.’”	A ranger met him and said, “Young sir, why do you weep so bitterly?” He replied, “I am the son of Kanshou and Bakuya. The King killed my father, and I wish to avenge him.” The ranger said, “I heard that the king is willing to buy a your head for a thousand gold pieces. Bring your head and the sword, and I will help you seek retribution.”
Envoy throws sword into wok	When the envoy saw this, he was astonished. To assist the king, he threw the sword into the wok.	/

(1) In “Sou shen ji,” Bakuya is blamed for taking too long to forge the sword, while in “Konjaku,” his crime lies in secretly hiding a cherished sword and deceiving the king.

(2) In “Sou shen ji,” Bakuya is executed directly by the king, while in “Konjaku,” the king only summons Bakuya for questioning.

(3) In “Sou shen ji,” Bakuya is killed by the king, whereas in “Konjaku,” Bakuya takes his own life.

(4) In “Sou shen ji,” the ranger is portrayed as a “brave and wise man” assisting BikenChaku in assassinating the king. However, in “Konjaku,” the term “guest” is altered to “royal envoy” acting on the king’s orders, supporting the king in combat against BikenChaku.

Below, we will analyze these four points in terms of “loyalty” and “filial piety.”

2.1 The Interplay of “Loyalty” and “Filial Piety” in China and Japan

In China, “loyalty” and “filial piety” reign as the paramount ethical values. Since ancient times, “filial piety” has played a pivotal role in maintaining social order, not just within families but throughout entire clans. Its influence extended to national politics, integrating into rituals, laws, and permeating all facets of society. While bonds of affection naturally exist between fathers and sons, and among siblings, these differ from the hierarchical relationships in governance. Consequently, during China’s early periods, “filial piety” overshadowed “loyalty.”

The Wei and Jin periods witnessed the writing of “Sou shen ji,” a time when clan influence surged. Here, the ethical significance of “filial piety” took center stage. It allowed individuals to avenge their relatives without legal consequences, often receiving societal approval. Hence, “filial piety” remained the prevailing virtue, even to the point of permitting revenge.

In contrast, Japan’s familial structure went beyond blood ties, emphasizing inheritance of the entire family’s estate. Their inheritance system, favoring primogeniture and the adoption of sons-in-law as heirs, differed significantly from China. This unique structure fused hierarchical and familial relationships, with the group’s leader serving as both the family head and a commanding superior.

“Konjaku” emerged during Japan’s flourishing late Heian period, marked by a booming manorial economy. In an era where government alone could not ensure order, cooperation within hierarchical relationships was vital for estate preservation and expansion. Masters’ kindness towards family and retainers led to reciprocal loyalty and righteousness. Without this unity grounded in hierarchical ethics, estates would have struggled. Consequently, late Heian Japan prioritized loyalty to superiors, emphasizing favour from superiors, over strict adherence to “filial piety.” This underscores the precedence of “loyalty” over “filial piety” in the societal context of the time.

2.1.1 Emphasizing “Loyalty”

In Volume 9, Story 44 of “Konjaku,” the character of the “envoy” differs significantly from the “ranger” persona in “Sou shen ji.” In “Sou shen ji,” the “ranger” willingly aids BikenChaku in seeking revenge, even at the cost of sacrificing themselves. Clearly, the image of the “ranger” is portrayed positively, endorsing the rationality of BikenChaku’s act of avenging blood relatives and “abandoning loyalty for filial piety.” As mentioned earlier, during the Wei and Jin periods, “filial piety” held supreme importance, surpassing “loyalty” and even transcending the realm of law. “Blood revenge” enjoyed widespread societal support at that time, aligning with the prevailing values of the era. Therefore, associating the “ranger” with BikenChaku on the side of justice reflects the characteristics of that time.

However, in “Konjaku,” volume 9, story 44, the role of the “envoy” replaces the “ranger” and opposes BikenChaku. This period emphasized the principle of “the master provides kindness, and the servant repays with loyalty, with loyalty preceding filial piety.” As an envoy, one complies with the king’s orders and acts loyally to declare decrees, embodying “loyalty.”

In this story, the compiler of “Konjaku” underscores “loyalty.” The added term “crime” when the king summons Bakuya indicates the compiler’s critical stance toward Bakuya’s act of concealing the sword and deceiving the king. Bakuya’s actions are seen as disloyal, as he concealed the sword despite the king’s orders, leading to dire consequences for his descendants.

In contrast to “Sou shen ji,” the king’s portrayal in “Konjaku,” volume 9, story 44, is more moderate. Instead of immediately

executing Bakuya, the king summons him for questioning, softening the king's image.

Through these changes in character roles, the highlighting of Bakuya's guilt, and the milder depiction of the king, "Konjaku" places greater emphasis on the importance of "loyalty" and portrays BikenChaku's act of abandoning loyalty for filial piety as less justified.

2.1.2 loyalty is higher than filial piety

The title of Volume 9 of "Konjaku" is "filial piety". However, in Story 44, which revolves around avenging a deceased father, the term "filial piety" is not explicitly used in the entire story. For example, in Story 3 of Volume 9, Ding Lan seeks revenge for his mother's severed arm, and this act of avenging a blood relative is similarly described as "avenging blood relatives". In contrast to the ambiguous attitude in Story 44, the compiler praises Ding Lan's revenge, explicitly stating, "The value of filial piety is precious and will endure forever". This suggests that the compiler did not intend to praise BikenChaku's filial actions.

Furthermore, if we compare the titles of Story 3 and Story 44 in Volume 9, we can observe a difference in the subjects:

-Volume 9, story3 "Shintan Ding Lan, Creating a Wooden Mother, Expressing Filial Piety"

-Volume 9, story43 "Duke Xian of Jin's son, Prince Shensheng, falsely accused by his stepmother Liji, committed suicide."

In Story 3, Ding Lan, the filial son, is the central figure. In contrast, the title of Story 44 spotlights not the filial son BikenChaku but rather his father, Bakuya. Nobuyuki Harada suggests that the compiler intentionally altered titles and added supplementary statements, mimicking the approach of "Chūkōsen" (a collection of tales from the Heian period) to shift the story's theme. Consequently, the primary theme of Story 44 isn't BikenChaku's filial piety but also Bakuya's act of crafting the sword and subsequent demise. This indicates the compiler regarded Bakuya as disloyal and, by extension, emphasized the significance of "loyalty" through his role as a "royal envoy."

In summary, Story 44 conveys the idea that "loyalty" prevails over "filial piety." Neglecting loyalty to one's ruler, even in the pursuit of filial piety, may lead to charges of disloyalty, highlighting the significance of loyalty as a core virtue.

3. Conclusion

In the late Heian period when the "Konjaku" was compiled, the rise of estate management in Japan led to the gradual erosion of centralized authority. The imperial court also lost its ability to maintain local order in the face of ongoing conflicts. Warriors emerged as armed forces defending and expanding estate lands, becoming prominent political figures.

The compilers of the "Konjaku" emphasized the importance of loyalty by rewriting regicide episodes. They underscored the concept that loyalty should take precedence over filial piety, guiding readers to regulate their behavior. This played a role in stabilizing the societal environment during that time.

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